New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1949

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"Magnolia Alley"

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NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK SUN

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"Magnolia Alley"

New York Post
HOME NEWS
APRIL 19, 1949

A Mild Little Comedy, Modest and Disarming

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

It would be deceiving you if I tried to say that "Magnolia Alley," which opened last night at the Mansfield Theatre, was a good or steadily interesting comedy. But it would also be untrue if I denied that, in its mild and unostentatiously homespun way, it had its amusing and likeable moments and characters. The new play by George Batson hardly has enough sturdy merit to make it a success in a season that demands smashes, but there is something disarming about its friendliness and good nature.

In a theatre in which the admission prices made sense and it was recognized that people who couldn't buy their way into "Death of a Salesman" and "South Pacific" might be induced to see something less ambitious and distinguished if the seats sold for a sum commensurate with the lesser quality of entertainment, I think an audience might be found for "Magnolia Alley." Since, however, we have to have all or nothing along Broadway, it is unlikely that such a public will find its way to the Mansfield.

Pious Orphan

One trouble with Mr. Batson's comedy is that the best thing about it is its incidental features. There is, for example, the character of a fiercely pious young orphan girl, played with enchanting humor by the oncoming Julie Harris, that is brightly and freshly comic in most engaging fashion. There is the more conventional role of a good-hearted prostitute, engagingly acted by Bibi Osterwald, that adds considerably to the evening, and an ex-military man, who turns out to have been a chaplain, is pleasantly managed by Fred Stewart.

The central figure of the comedy, a hopeful, benevolent and rather bibulous keeper of a Southern rooming house, is also a winningly humorous creation, as Jessie Royce Landis plays her, but the story of her efforts to look out for her household, including a daughter she sensibly loathes, is not altogether a happy one. A lot of the narrative has to do with the disagreeable daughter's betrayed husband, a forlorn ex-pugilist, and, since he isn't impressively played by Jackie Cooper, he hardly adds to the liveliness of the occasion.

Good Portrayals

Although Miss Harris contributes the most enlivening portrait to "Magnolia Alley," there are some other good portrayals in the minor roles. I have already mentioned Miss Osterwald and Mr. Stewart. In addition, there is Frances Bavier, who has an entertaining scene as a hopeful and well-meaning social worker, while the ingenue role, which isn't much of a part, is given life and interest because Hildy Parks plays it with such quiet freshness. Anne Jackson is fairly successful as the landlady's unpleasant daughter.

"Magnolia Alley" isn't basically skillful enough in its storytelling to make it live up to the interest aroused by its minor characters, and there are long sections that are bogged down in a kind of amiable dullness. In a word or two, it isn't a comedy that is likely to cause anyone to do much ardent cheering for it. But there is so much that is modestly amusing and amiably disarming in its ramshackle structure that it seems a little heartless to subject it to ruthless criticism.

'MAGNOLIA ALLEY'

Play by George Batson; staged by Carl Shain; setting by Edward Gilbert; costumes by Guy Kent; presented by Lester Cutler at the Mansfield Theatre, April 18, 1949. The cast:

Angel Tuttle.....Julie Harris
Laura Beaumont.....
Jessie Royce Landis
Andy Hamill.....Jackie Cooper
Maybelle.....Bibi Osterwald
Tom.....Robert White
Joadie.....Hildy Parks
Miss Eels.....Frances Bavier
Nita.....Anne Jackson
Cravin.....Brad Dexter
Colonel Stacey.....Fred Stewart
The Doctor.....Don Kennedy
Mr. Albus...Douglas Rutherford

Synopsis: The action takes place in the living room of Laura's home, in a small Southern town. Act I, Middletown, early summer. Act II, Scene 1: Late afternoon, a week later. Scene 2: Two weeks later. Act III, Scene 1: Early the next afternoon. Scene 2: The following afternoon.

Journal American
APRIL 19, 1949

Lacks Skill and Taste But Is Mean, Funny

By ROBERT GARLAND

At the Mansfield, "Magnolia Alley" could be the shrubby end of "Tobacco Road." There's rough mean fun in this new comedy by George Batson. And it's chock-a-block with seedy Southern characters not too overdrawn to be enjoyed by such members of the you-all set as hail from deep down thataway.

Mr. Batson is author also of "Ramshackle Inn" which once served the off-screen performing purposes of Zasu Pitts. And, although his second piece has the better craftsmanship, the author is yet to learn that it's against all rules to change stories in the middle of a play.

Tried-out last Summer in Skowhegan with Miss Landis as the petticoated Jester Lesley with a smack of learning, "Magnolia Alley" comes to town after prior-to-Broadway fixing. Now, as long as the story concerns Laura Beaumont, the play's rightful pivot, it's no little way from being unamusing.

But when, half way across the acts, Laura Beaumont is overrun by Andy Hamill, it's like beginning again with a narrative that's transparent and contrived.

* * *

Play Bogs Down

The Laura Beaumont who's overrun by Andy Hamill is the keeper of a boarding house in a small Southern town. A loose but not unlikely looking widow woman who's waiting for a lover to return, her boarders, her neighbors and her wayward daughter are her everyday concern.

This wayward daughter is married to the aforesaid Andy Hamill, a likable young boner with a hole in his head. But she has been untrue to him while a tried and truer rival has remained faithfully at his side, darning his socks and damning the unfaithful one he still clings to.

It's the Andy-Joadie-Nita triangle that overruns the pivotal story of Laura Beaumont, her dead husband, her missing lover and her new boarder who looks, sounds and makes passes like the real thing. Laura Beaumont and her threesome never recover their previous heartiness.

And the play doesn't come back again, either.

* * *

Cooper Effective

Newly home from Hollywood, where she was photographed in "Mr. Belvedere Goes to College" and "It Happens Every Spring," Jessie Royce Landis, my favorite actress with three names—not forgetting Cornelia Otis Skinner, Erin O'Brien Moore or even Mary Miles Minter—has a lovely Landisian time.

One of the most charming of women off-stage, on-stage she loves to make herself uncharming. Recently, she uncharmed herself in "Little A" and "The Last Dance." This time, she has neither Otto Kruger nor Oscar Homolka to help her. She has, instead, Jackie Cooper as her charm-lending son-in-law.

I can't tell you how sincere and effective a three-dimensional performer Master Cooper has become.

As the Andy Hamill who's to blame for the overrunning of Miss Landis' Laura Beaumont, the erstwhile Skippy of the films is a young actor to be reckoned with on Broadway.

In a cast superior to its play, Julie Harris, Bibi Osterwald and the rest are worthy of the acclaim which was theirs last evening. Elsewhere, you'll read that "Magnolia Alley" lacks skill in writing, taste in situation. Here, you'll read that it's also rough, mean and funny.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

APRIL 19, 1949

= *By* HOWARD BARNES =

Late Season Mishap

THE redoubtable Jessie Royce Landis is trapped in a singularly tasteless charade at the Mansfield Theater. "Magnolia Alley" explores sacred and profane love with a minimum of wit or wisdom. The star has next to no help from George Batson's unkempt arrangement of lines and situations. She improvises expediently as she dominates odd goings-on in a small Southern town boarding house, but she is fighting a losing cause. It would take far more than a lusty performance to make this production anything but an affront.

• • •

The author has scrambled a number of ideas together in his plot, with innuendo as his chief selling point. For a time there is a suggestion that the fight racket is to be exposed in the course of what passes as a comedy, but an iceman and a new roomer take over in no uncertain manner from the punchy pugilist. Jackie Cooper plays the slugger with an awkward attempt to make the character consequential. The play is constantly leaving him going through silly motions. "Magnolia Alley" is a show to frustrate the most eager interpreter.

• • •

Julie Harris, for example, has the uncomfortable role of a religious maid, who takes an eligible suitor away from her mistress for no good reason. Fred Stewart plays the bachelor intent on matrimony with as much skill as one could wish, but he is lost in the shuffle. Bibi Osterwald plays an ancient profession with zealous make-believe and Anne Jackson darts embarrassingly in and out of several scenes as the fighter's wife. The acting is not bad in "Magnolia Alley." The play itself is awful.

• • •

Carl Shain has taken credit for the direction of a late season mishap. He has succeeded in getting a lot of players on and off the stage, but he has not made them credible or vaguely interesting. The setting by Edward Gilbert makes much of a passing train and a slamming window. Miss Landis raises the window on each occasion. It is better business than she has for most of the time in a tawdry exhibit.

The Sun

APRIL 19, 1949

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

Not Much of a Play.

The collapsing theatrical season yielded a new play last night—"Magnolia Alley," a meager and straggling comedy, written by George Batson, and presented at the Mansfield. Several nice performances kept the evening from being disastrous.

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Playwright Batson gives us some dilapidated, wrong-side-of-the-tracks folk in a small Southern town and presents the case of Laura Beaumont and her brood. Laura is a raffish old girl, easy-going and philosophical, who runs a rooming house, drinks mintless juleps, and has all the woes of a Mrs. Wiggs, out of the drama of long ago.

Laura's daughter, married to a fighter, goes off with a wrestler, returns when she is broke, and then disappears with $500, the life savings of an amiable and thrifty trollop who lives upstairs. That stolen money must be returned and things are in a fairly dreadful state until the friendly Colonel Stacey comes along with an offer of marriage for the pious housemaid. The Colonel thinks he can produce $500.

"Magnolia Alley" brings reminders of such pieces as "Primrose Path" and "Chicken Every Sunday" and it offers a suggestion or two of the squalor of "The Great Big Doorstep." It's a comedy that doesn't actually play; it just ambles and rambles. And there is also the fact that its incidental characters are more interesting than the principals.

Some members of the cast do more for the new play than the author did. Jessie Royce Landis, a resolute and intelligent actress, now given to a Southern drawl and inclined to much face-twisting, makes something of a character of the Widow Beaumont. Young Julie Harris, in her third appearance of the season, gets religion in "Magnolia Alley" and she reveals that she has a talent for comedy, as she had for terror and tears. Fred Stewart is easy and amusing as the wife-seeking Colonel.

There are good performances from Bibi Osterwald, Hildy Parks and Frances Bavier. Jackie Cooper struggles with the badly-written part of Andy, the fighter. Edward Gilbert has provided a good setting and there are several times when the realistic effect of a train hurtling past Laura's rickety doorstep serves to enliven the proceedings.

"Magnolia Alley" isn't awful. It just isn't very good.

Daily Mirror

APRIL 19, 1949

'Magnolia Alley' Fails To Bloom on Big Stem

By ROBERT COLEMAN

George Batson started out with some interesting characters and an idea for a salty and amusing comedy, but failed to do much with them when he got down to typing "Magnolia Alley." His characters too often degenerate into caricatures, and the plot is more contrived than credible.

Though Lester Cutler, new to the managerial ranks, has given the new arrival at the Mansfield Theatre the benefit of a cast of first-rate players and a genuinely atmospheric setting by Edward Gilbert, they are insufficient to offset the shortcomings of the Batson script.

Magnolia Alley is a street near the railroad tracks in a small Southern town. On it is the boarding house of Laura Beaumont, a broad-minded lady who harbors an amazing array of strays. Among them are a gal of dubious virtue; a couple of adopted daughters—one with a religious complex and the other in love with Laura's son-in-law, an ex-prizefighter disabled in World War II.

As if things weren't bad enough in the Beaumont household, Laura's tramp of a daughter has to return and betray her husband a second time, and go south with a boarder's bankroll. But author Batson comes up with some beautiful rainbows-in-the-sky in time for a happy ending.

Jessie Royce Landis, Jackie Cooper, Julie Harris, Bibi Osterwald, Robert White, Hildy Parks, Frances Bavier, Anne Jackson, Brad Dexter and Fred Stewart labor valiantly and as skilfully as director Carl Shain permits on behalf of the Batson comedy. We recommend Miss Parks to the attention of the talent scouts. She is a pretty and likable ingenue. There is nothing brassy or stagy about her.

Three "firsts" are represented at the Mansfield. Producer Cutler, director Shain and actor Cooper, former movie juvenile, are all making their Broadway debuts. It is too bad that they are not more auspicious.

A friendly first-night audience seemed to enjoy "Magnolia Alley." Its members were generous with laughter and applause, but we could not share their enthusiasm for a half-baked play. A master chef should have been called in during the road tryouts to keep the concoction from falling flat as it came out of the tune-up oven.